



ERS *Research Brief*

Food Assistance

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Household Food Security in the United States, 2003

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Food security—access to enough food for active, healthy living—is a given for most U.S. households. In fact, more Americans are concerned about overeating than about struggling to put enough food on the table. But a minority of Americans experience food insecurity at times when their access to enough food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. A smaller proportion are hungry at times as a result. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has published statistical reports on household food security in the United States for each year since 1995. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) took responsibility for the series in 1998. ERS' *Household Food Security in the United States, 2003* presents statistics on households' food security, food expenditures, and use of food assistance for that year.

What Is the Issue?

The U.S. Government has set a goal of reducing the prevalence of food insecurity from 12 percent—as measured in 1995—to 6 percent or less by 2010. Initial progress was encouraging. But the economic recession that began in 2001 pushed the prevalence of food insecurity slightly upward. Reliable monitoring of food security, food insecurity, and hunger is vital to public and private food assistance programs and other government initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity. USDA's annual food security report provides statistics that guide planning for Federal, State, and community food assistance programs. Food security means access to enough food at all times for active, healthy living. Food-insecure households lack that consistent access. Most food-insecure households avoid hunger (the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food) by limiting the types of food they buy and by relying on public and/or private food programs. But in about one-third of food-insecure households, one or more household members are hungry at times.

What Did the Study Find?

Throughout the year in 2003, 88.8 percent of U.S. households were food secure, essentially unchanged from 2002. The remaining 11.2 percent (12.6 million households) were food insecure. These households, at some time during the year, had difficulty providing enough food for all members due to a lack of resources. Within the 11.2 percent, 7.7 percent were food insecure without hunger, and 3.5 percent had one or more household members who were hungry at some time, unchanged from 2002. The prevalence of food insecurity with hunger among children was 0.5 percent of all U.S. households with children, essentially unchanged from 2002.

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The number of people who were hungry because of food insecurity on a given day was a small fraction of those who were hungry at some time during the year. Converting annual into daily statistics takes into account how long these conditions lasted in the typical household. A majority of those who were hungry at some time during the year were hungry in several different months, but only for a few days each month. And a small proportion experienced just a single brief episode of hunger.

On a typical day in November 2003, for example, between 490,000 and 698,000 households (0.4-0.6 percent of all U.S. households) in the Nation included one or more members who were hungry because the household could not afford enough food. Children are usually shielded from hunger even when resources are inadequate to provide food for the entire family. Nevertheless, hunger among children occurred in 33,000 to 37,000 households (0.08 to 0.09 percent of all U.S. households with children) on a typical day.

The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably among households of various types. Rates of food insecurity were substantially higher among households: with incomes below the Federal poverty line; headed by single women with children; Black households; and Hispanic households. Geographically, food insecurity was more common in central cities and rural areas than in suburbs, and in the South and the West than in other areas of the Nation. The prevalence of hunger followed a similar pattern.

Some food-insecure households turn to Federal food assistance programs or emergency food providers in their communities when the households are unable to buy enough food. Just over half of the food-insecure households surveyed in 2003 said that in the previous month they had participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food assistance programs—the National School Lunch Program, the Food Stamp Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). About 20 percent of food insecure households got emergency food from a food pantry, and 2 percent ate one or more meals at an emergency kitchen. The report also examines the amount households spent for food and the extent to which households that participated in Federal food programs also received assistance from community programs.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data for the annual ERS food security report come from a USDA-sponsored survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. ERS compiles the responses to the survey, an annual supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). The food security supplement covers 50,000 households, and is a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 112 million households. The food security survey asks households 18 questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity. Based on their responses, households are classified as food secure, food insecure without hunger, or food insecure with hunger. Hunger among children is measured by responses to a subset of questions about the conditions and experiences of children. The survey also asks how much the households spend on food and whether they used public food assistance programs.